

David Levine

No Applause. Repeat.

Somebody (I think it was Andrew Solomon) said that you could always recognize a Bruce Nauman piece by the way it made you want to leave the room immediately. I didn't quite understand how true that was until I began preparing for this lecture. For instance, I'd especially love to leave this room right now. Nauman's work—like all work, when you look at it too closely—is extremely hard to pin down. The more you talk about it, the more confused you get. So this talk may be a mixture of coherence and complete babble, in a way that Nauman might actually appreciate. But without further ado . . .

1. PREFACE: THIS IS THEATER

I started out as a professional theater director in New York from 1998 to about 2004, doing plays at both commercial theaters uptown and more experimental venues downtown. By the time I first visited Berlin in 2004, I was really, really, really frustrated because the experimental theaters were too broke to do anything spectacular and the commercial theaters were so invested in spectacle that they couldn't afford to experiment—with audiences, with performance styles, with anything. So I felt extremely boxed in, hemmed in, bouncing between these two poles of mainstream and downtown, forced to do the same thing over and over and over again.

While museum hopping in Berlin, I happened upon the exhibition *Bruce Nauman: Theaters of Experience* at the Deutsche Guggenheim just before it closed. Prior to that, I wasn't very familiar with Nauman's work. I was a theater guy. And at that point, I would kind of bristle



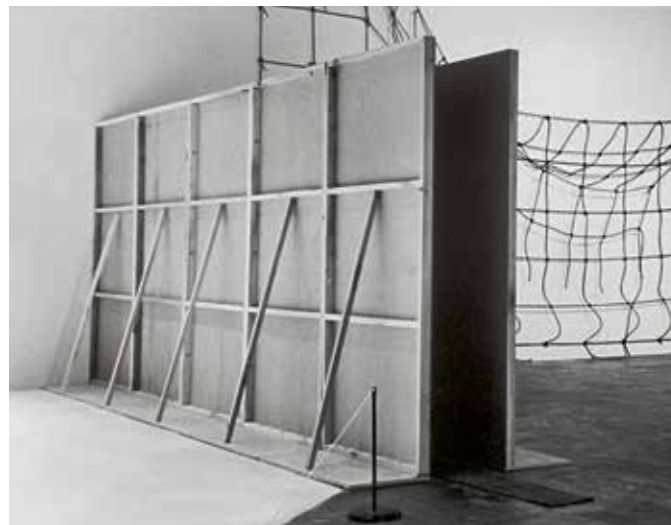
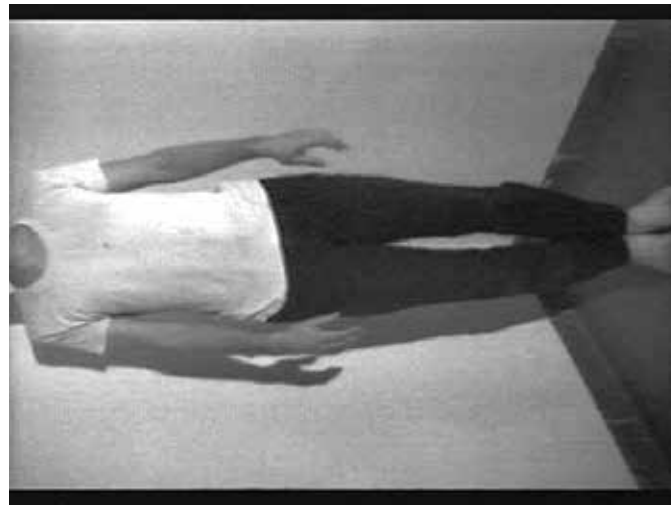
Cover of *Bruce Nauman: Theaters of Experience* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2003)

when I saw the term “theater” invoked in the art world because it was always invoked dismissively (as with Chris Burden or Michael Fried or any number of people) or superficially (as with Burden and Fried and Allan Kaprow and pretty much everyone else). But in this case, the title seemed perfectly appropriate. Susan Cross, the exhibition’s curator, and Nauman seemed to have captured something integral, not only about *my* experience of theater, but also about what the experience of theater could actually be.

One piece in the exhibition that grabbed me and didn’t let me go was the early studio piece *Bouncing in the Corner, No. 1* (1968, p. 65), in which Nauman did just that—bouncing up and down in a corner—for an hour. This bouncing crystalized my experience of being an artist in the theater: the creator’s identifying traits are either cut off or isolated, and the incessant slam of his body in the corner expressed the nullity of the endeavor, as well as the frustration it provoked. I just kept doing the same stupid thing.

The other piece that really struck me was *Performance Corridor* (1969, p. 65), which was a simple structure of two twenty-foot-long walls spaced about twenty inches apart. As a museum visitor, you either walk in or you don’t. That’s about it. The space is just tight enough to constrain and control your movements a little bit, which is pretty much exactly what Nauman built the corridor to do. He had built it a year previous for the 1968 video *Walk with Contrapposto* (p. 21), in which, over the course of—again—an hour, he walks in this exaggerated Renaissance posture, up and down the hallway. (While researching this, I actually came across a few homages, which is, I guess, to be expected.)¹

For the Whitney Museum of American Art’s 1969 *Anti-Illusion: Processes/Procedures* show, a year after Nauman shot *Walk with Contrapposto*, he opted to exhibit just the corridor itself. *Performance Corridor* is often viewed as a turning point in his practice, when

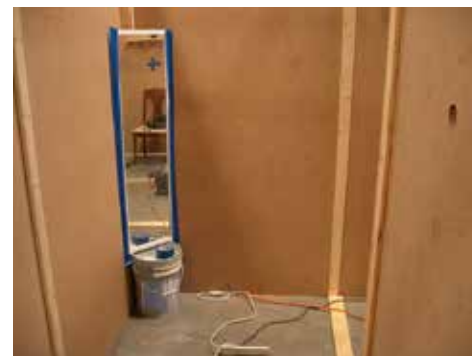


Still from *Bouncing in the Corner, No. 1*, 1968
Performance Corridor, 1969

he shifted the subject of his physical experiments from himself to his audience. Nauman has declared that he had not previously allowed audiences to get involved in his work because he couldn't figure out how to control the situation.² He was very serious about this. He wasn't a Robert Morris you-can-pick-up-pieces-and-play-with-it kind of artist. But he began to figure it out with *Performance Corridor*—although he would later say, as he started making corridor after corridor after corridor, that he felt uncomfortable about this piece because it didn't allow him enough control over the viewer's experience.³

Where I perceived *Bouncing the Corner, No. 1* as a bleak-but-familiar read on making art, I viewed this particular corridor as an equally bleak expression of what audiences and performers can (expect to) experience. There was something about the way Nauman's work expressed both rage and constraint—rage as the result of limits and limits as a way of reining in rage—that really stayed with me when I left Berlin. But it also pointed the way toward making work out of or about frustration with those limits.

A few months later, by more or less a total accident, I wound up getting invited to spend a week and make a piece titled *'Night, Motherfucker* (2004, p. 67) at Gavin Brown's old space in Chelsea. Nauman's influence just came pouring out. I built a big, L-shaped, faux-Minimalist sculpture out of medium-density fiberboard and locked two professional actors inside. They would perform two-person Broadway plays at full performance intensity, on a loop, for the entire day. Because they were unseen within the structure, they could have their scripts with them; they didn't need to memorize them or move around or anything. Each day brought a different pair of actors and a different play, eight hours a day, nothing but the same play. There were a lot of plays, such as Donald L. Coburn's *The Gin Game* (1976), a David Mamet play, and, of course, Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother* (1982), which gave the work its title and was on Broadway at the time.



There were a couple of twists in that sculpture. Initially, the actors were seated on either end of the L, so they could hear each other but couldn't see each other. But once it was installed, I thought it would be nice to either relieve or exacerbate the situation by adding a mirror at the crook of the L, so they could at least see each other's reflection. Just as the actors couldn't really see each other, the audience couldn't see the actors. They could only hear them. They couldn't see what was happening inside—whether the actors were being incredibly passionate or eating lunch. A lot of the time, they were doing both. And then, at the last minute, I moved the piece from the center of the gallery closer to the walls and added benches. So if you settled in to listen or absorb the plays, you could really feel this structure pressing in on you physically, and the experience wound up being much more claustrophobic than meditative. The mirror, the monotony, the perceptual deprivations, the consciousness splitting, the claustrophobia—these are all tricks used by Nauman. These were all things that I must have borrowed after seeing his two works in Berlin.

But the real problem is that premises always entail more premises. You can't emulate one person's productivity, for instance, without emulating their Adderall addiction. Emulating someone's laissez-faire spontaneity might require emulating their fucked-up family life. And maybe you can't adopt Nauman's formal premises in your first proper artwork without acquiring a fatalistic worldview that stays with you even once you think you've gotten over it. At some point, when I was trying to persuade an actor to perform in this box, he asked me, "Well, is there a curtain call?" I was like, "Of course there's no curtain call; they can't see you." And he replied, sensibly, "Well, why would I want to perform if there was no applause?" I realize now that by borrowing from Nauman's *Bouncing in the Corner, No. 1* and *Performance Corridor*, I basically remade his *Clown Torture* (1987, pp. 49, 127) without even knowing about it.

[*David Levine plays a video clip.*] This is an excerpt from *Clown Torture*, which is a multichannel video installation with other clowns in similarly constrained situations:

WALTER STEVENS: Pete and Repeat were sittin' on a fence. Pete fell off. Who was left? Repeat. Oh. Pete and Repeat were sittin' on a fence. Pete fell off. Who was left? Repeat. Oh. Oh. Oh. Pete and Repeat were sittin' on a fence. Pete fell off. Who was left? Repeat. Oh. Oh. Oh. Pete and Repeat were sittin' on a fence. Pete fell off. Who was left? Repeat. Oh. Oh. Oh. . . .

2. ACTORS

I always thought that after the piece at Gavin Brown, I had moved on from Nauman. But, as I began working on this lecture, I realized: maybe not. My work stems from theater and uses theatrical elements to examine contemporary constructions of consciousness, labor, empathy, and work. That's pretty different from the rugged, stark, existential slant of Nauman's practice, which rarely, with a couple of exceptions, gets bogged down in historical specifics. When people talk about Nauman in terms of *performance*, they usually talk about him in terms of Judson Dance Theater or Meredith Monk or Yvonne Rainer or other choreographic experiments with form; and when they talk about Nauman in terms of *theater*, they generally talk about him in terms of Samuel Beckett or something similarly existential, largely because these are the influences that Nauman acknowledges. But that's not really the kind of choreography or the kind of theater that I ever enjoyed. My concerns tend to be a lot more worldly—in the sense of "mundane"—and a lot more commercial. Yet, from commercial and sociological points of view, there's a lot to explore in Nauman because all the same questions—about monotony, about exploitation, about power—still apply, whether they're posed in abstract or concrete terms. So, for a change, I'm going

to read Nauman in terms of a more commercial kind of performance and a more commercial kind of spectatorship, and then try to figure out where the performance and the spectatorship meet.

Let's start with actors. Joan Lancaster was a roughly C-list film and TV actor. In 1975 she was in an episode of *Police Woman*, and then in 1979 she was in the made-for-TV movie *Transplant* as well as a really, really raunchy film that mixed social consciousness with blaxploitation called *Good Luck, Miss Wyckoff*. She was always a background actor. But in 1979 she picked up a two-season, occasionally recurring role on the soap opera *Dallas* as Linda Bradley. Bradley always appeared alongside Marilee Stone, played by Fern Fitzgerald, as emissaries from the Texan high-society organization known as the Daughters of the Alamo. They functioned as a kind of bitchy chorus. I'm going to give you a little taste of Lancaster's acting as she conspires with Fitzgerald's character against Sue Ellen Ewing, a starring role played by Linda Gray. Sue Ellen, who is pregnant, has had too much to drink at a Daughters of the Alamo event:

SUE ELLEN EWING [*drunkenly approaching a man, who is standing next to Linda Bradley*]: That was a wonderful talk, Mr. Martin. Moved us all deeply. And you can be sure that our organization is going to help you with your hospital project.

LINDA BRADLEY [*awkwardly laughing*]: Well, what Sue Ellen means is your research project.

SUE ELLEN [*giggling*]: Oh, that's exactly what I meant! Of course! How silly of me!

MARILEE STONE [*who has observed this interaction, pulls aside Miss Ellie Ewing*]: Could I have a word with you Miss Ellie?

MISS ELLIE EWING: Certainly, Marilee. . . .

[*The scene changes to what seems to be a few hours later. A man, J. R. Ewing, approaches Linda, Marilee, and Miss Ellie, who are standing together at the edge of the frame.*]

J. R. EWING: Hi, ladies.

WOMEN: Hi, J. R.

J. R.: How'd everything go?

MARILEE: Just fine, J. R.

[*Sue Ellen, who had been sitting at a table, slightly removed from the ladies, struggles to get out of her chair and appears to be somewhat embarrassed as she sees her husband, J. R.*]

J. R. [*walking over to Sue Ellen*]: Hey, darling. You alright?

SUE ELLEN: I'm fine.

MISS ELLIE: She's had a very hard day, J. R. These meetings take a lot out of her.

J. R.: Maybe she shouldn't have so many meetings?

MISS ELLIE: She and I have talked about it and she's hoping that the ladies will let her resign.

[*Sue Ellen looks dumbfounded.*]

LINDA [*feigning concern*]: Well, if you really want to, Sue Ellen.

MARILEE [*gleefully smirking*]: Just 'til the baby's born, of course, and you're feeling yourself again.

SUE ELLEN: Thank you very much.

MARILEE [*grimacing*]: I guess we'd better get going. Seth will be wondering what happened. Bye.⁴

Between 1980 and 1985, Lancaster goes completely off the radar. She only resurfaces, briefly, in 1985, speaking the following lines with the same laser-like blend of skepticism and intensity that she brought to her brief stint on *Dallas*:

JOAN LANCASTER: You pay, we pay. This is payment. I don't want to die. You don't want to die. We don't want to die. This is fear of death. I was a good boy. You were a good boy. We were good boys. That was

good. I was a good girl. You were a good girl. We were good girls.
That was good.

But the TV isn't in your home. It's in a gallery. It's part of a two-channel video installation by Nauman called *Good Boy Bad Boy* (1985, p. 73), for which the artist employed two actors, Lancaster and Tucker Smallwood. It begins with

TUCKER SMALLWOOD: I was a good boy.

JOAN LANCASTER: I was a good boy.

SMALLWOOD: You were a good boy.

LANCASTER: You were a good boy. We were . . .

SMALLWOOD: We were good boys.

LANCASTER: . . . good boys. That was good.

SMALLWOOD: That was good.

LANCASTER: I was a good girl. You were . . .

SMALLWOOD: I was a good girl.

LANCASTER: . . . a good girl. We were . . .

SMALLWOOD: You were a good girl.

LANCASTER: . . . good girls. That was good.

SMALLWOOD: We were good girls.

LANCASTER: I was a bad boy.

SMALLWOOD: That was good.

LANCASTER: You were a bad boy.

SMALLWOOD: I was a bad boy.

LANCASTER: We were bad boys.

SMALLWOOD: You were a bad boy.

LANCASTER: That was bad.

SMALLWOOD: We were bad boys.

LANCASTER: I was a bad girl.

SMALLWOOD: That was bad.

LANCASTER: You were a bad girl.



This goes on for a really long time. They actually have a hundred phrases that they conjugate, beginning with “I was a good boy, you were a good boy, we were good boys, that was good” and ending with “I don’t want to die, you don’t want to die, we don’t want to die, this is fear of death.” They each do this sequence five times, becoming more and more dramatic as they go. This is close to the last loop:

LANCASTER [*delivering her lines with much more intensity, shouting at times*]: I like to shit. You like to shit. We like to shit. This is shitting. I piss, you piss, we piss. This is piss. I like to sleep. You like to sleep. We like to sleep. This is sleeping. I pay, you pay, we pay. This is payment. I don’t want to die! You don’t want to die! We don’t want to die! This is fear of death! I was a good boy.

The camera inches incrementally closer on each of the first four takes and then recedes on the fifth. The performances were shot separately. They are meant to be played looping on separate monitors, so that eventually the phrases cease to match up. That’s when it really starts to feel like they’re talking to each other. Nauman pointed out in an interview that since Smallwood came from theater and Lancaster from TV, they had very different acting styles—the theater actor being more broad and dramatic, the TV actress being more tight and controlled.⁵ What’s interesting here is *why* Nauman chose to hire professional actors. Like, why couldn’t he shoot his friends? That’s what all the other artists did. What is it about professional actors? In an interview, Nauman gave a typically Nauman-y answer. (If you read enough interviews with Nauman, he starts to feel like Jeff Koons in terms of how he responds to things. There’s always this crazy blankness. It’s all like “Yep. Yep. Yep. Kinda. Yep.”) Nauman said that he wanted this strange surface quality that actors convey (similar to what he’s said about clowns and mimes): “What interests me is the line between others. Because they are actors, it’s not autobiographical, it’s not real anger, but pretending to be angry and they are pretty good at it, but

maybe not really convincing. I like all these different levels, knowing and not knowing quite how to take the situation, how to relate to it.”⁶ This claim doesn’t bring us much closer to understanding why actors bring this special quality, but I can kind of see what he means.

In *Good Boy Bad Boy*, the actors are yoked to one of Nauman’s more recognizable preoccupations—the possibility of language to communicate anything. It’s a possibility that he explores by exhaustively examining an extensive set of severely limited grammatical permutations. You see it in *One Hundred Live and Die* (1984), in his neon works that reduce everything to puns, in *Clown Torture*, where “Pete and Repeat sat on a fence. Pete fell off. Who’s left? Repeat” is explored again and again. There’s another clown that just says “no” over and over. But with the clowns and the actors, you have to wonder how they felt about it, because that is not what they’re trained to do. They’re trained to get involved; they’re trained to give you their heart; they’re trained to invest in a narrative; they’re trained to invest in story; they’re trained to give you, with every repetition, “the illusion of the first time.”⁷ Actually, I always wonder how conventional actors feel about performing in art videos, because art videos pretty much always pride themselves on their anti-mimetic and anti-emotional tendencies.

In this case, I was lucky enough to find a note on Smallwood’s blog, where he writes that he was wandering through the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in the 1990s. Somebody was like, “Hey, you’re that guy in the Louvre.” For a while, he had no idea what they were talking about: “[The Nauman shoot] was so abstract and amorphous I had nothing to hold on to and promptly forgot about it. In those days, I was doing 2 or 3 jobs a week but primarily for products.”⁸ When I wrote to Smallwood to find out what his experience was like, he replied, “I didn’t know it was an art video. I didn’t know anything about his intentions that I remember. It was simply a paycheck.”⁹

But what's really striking is that, while *Good Boy Bad Boy* is totally alien to what actors do in a performance, it's totally consistent with what actors do in acting class. Here is an example of Sanford Meisner's repetition exercise, where two actors rapidly and neutrally take turns repeating the same two lines [*Levine plays a video clip, which seems recognizably from the 1980s*]:

MAN: Your shirt is tied.

WOMAN: My shirt is tied.

MAN: Your shirt is tied.

WOMAN: My shirt is tied.

MAN: Your shirt is tied.

WOMAN: My shirt is tied.

MAN: Your shirt is tied.

WOMAN: My shirt is tied.

MAN: Your shirt is tied.

WOMAN: My shirt is. . . .

Meisner, along with Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler, was responsible for making psychological realism the default approach to American acting. From the fifties on, proponents of method acting poured out of the Actor's Studio, the Meisner Studio, and the Adler Conservatory (now the Stella Adler Studio of Acting) onto stages, studios, and film lots all over America. Marlon Brando, Robert De Niro, Robert Duvall, Meryl Streep—pretty much anyone you can think of—shared this training. All three of these approaches were descended from the system of the great Russian actor, director, and teacher Konstantin Stanislavski, who realized early in his acting career, one night onstage, that he suddenly didn't feel authentic.

I can't convey to you enough just how bizarre a notion that would have been in Europe at the turn of the century. Prior to the twentieth

century, acting was just a job. You put your costume on, you perform, you leave. There was no question of your actual self fusing with the character. You weren't supposed to feel *authentic*; you were acting. But Stanislavski had this weird sense that he needed to feel *truer* when he was performing. Acting became not a job but a calling, a vocation. To use a phrase that future acting teachers would lay claim to, acting suddenly became "the art of living truthfully under imaginary circumstances." No one in theater stopped to question the paradox: why should you feel real when you're faking it? Instead, Stanislavski and his American descendants set about to devise a set of techniques to block out the distractions of audience and theater and self-consciousness, so that you could experience the onstage reality as *your* reality, so that you could truly be in the moment. Thus we get terms and techniques like the "fourth wall" or being "in character," for which you need meditation, focus, belief. These concepts are designed to bring the actor as close as possible to feeling authentically alive when they're onstage, a fusion of themselves and the character they're inhabiting. This sensation can feel, for both actor and audience, like an electric presentness radiating from the stage. I'm sure that all of you have at some point felt that kind of electricity, if you ever go to plays. It's rare but real.

Strasberg's mode of method acting tries to achieve this *presentness* by reexperiencing sensations from the actor's own life; Adler advocates achieving this presentness through a fully researched and imagined experience of the character's circumstances. Meisner claims presentness onstage is achieved by pure and immediate response to stimulus, rather than any research. But what's common to all of these approaches, and what brings us back to Nauman again, is a profound skepticism about reflection or critical awareness of any kind. Or as Meisner says, "don't be intelligent, don't make sense" because it just gets in the way of immediacy.¹⁰ His repetition exercise is just a means to inculcate

responsiveness, using conjugation to empty language of its sense and make it a vehicle for feeling. Or again, as Meisner says, “when in doubt, repeat.”¹¹

Now, this evacuation of meaning through repetition can go one of two ways. It can either liberate a whole universe of affect and meaning, as the acting teachers claim, or it can lead to the following:

WALTER STEVENS: Pete and Repeat were sittin’ on a fence. Pete fell off. Who was left? Repeat. Oh. Pete and Repeat were sittin’ on a fence. Pete fell off. Who was left? Repeat. Oh. Oh. Pete and Repeat were sittin’ on a fence. Pete fell off. Who was left? Repeat. Oh. Oh. Oh. Pete and Repeat were sittin’ on a fence. Pete fell off. Who was left? Repeat. Oh. Oh. Oh. . . .

Feeling trapped. The evacuation of affect, performance as work, work as a prison. A desperate and frustrated attempt to keep things interesting within severe constraints.

Now, of course, one of these is acting class and the other is performance; one of them is backstage, the other is onstage; one of them is private, the other is public. These are polarities that Nauman is always exploring. But I tend to side with Nauman’s take: performing for a living is a pretty bleak life. From the actor’s or clown’s perspective, you’re working hard to give life to new subjectivity! But from the outside, it just looks like boring, frustrating repetition.

I tried to have it both ways in a project I did in 2007 called *Bauerntheater* (p. 79), where I hired an American method actor, who didn’t know German, to learn the role of a farmer in a 1950s play by the German playwright Heiner Müller about socialist farmers in that country. We had it translated; he learned the role; and we staged it but never performed it. Instead we shipped him out to a little Land art center in Brandenburg, where the play is set, gave him two acres of land and one ton of potatoes, and asked him to be “in character” five days a week over the course of a month. This entailed, in other words,



Levine, *Bauerntheater*, 2007
Tourists watching the *Bauerntheater* actor perform

farming; for five weeks, ten hours a day. He never delivered any lines. He never did anything theatrical. He just had to farm, as somebody else. He could take breaks, but he could only take breaks in character. So he could stop farming, but he could never stop acting. When he was sitting in his hut on a break, he would have to try to think the character's thoughts. Like I said, I tried to split the difference: rich interior life, monotonous exterior. But it was still pretty bleak, although the tourists with picnics who came to watch a guy doing manual labor seemed to enjoy it.

Yet in 1973, Nauman created *Tony Sinking into the Floor, Face Up and Face Down* (p. 55) and *Elke Allowing the Floor to Rise Up over Her, Face Up* (p. 81). These works are based on exercises that he had devised in his studio in 1968–69. The exercise is simply to lie there and convince yourself that you're sinking into the floor and to do it for as long as possible. Nauman was attempting to “examine a purely mental activity as opposed to a purely physical situation which might incur some mental activity.”¹² He wanted to know what happened if your mind was somewhere totally different than your body. So he concentrated on trying to sink into the floor or on having the floor rise up over him. He would practice this on the wooden floor of his studio, attempting to do it for an hour at a time, but claims he never made it past fifteen to twenty minutes.¹³ In 1973 Nauman had the opportunity to use a television studio in New York and decided it would be interesting to watch other people enact these exercises and that maybe other people would have better luck than just fifteen or twenty minutes. And he decided to use actors. This marked the first time he used a professional studio rather than his own as well as the first time he shot someone other than himself performing. Again: why did he need professional actors? Are they better at enacting someone else's agenda? Is it because they are more willing to follow orders? Is it because they are trained to inhabit a foreign subjectivity? Is it because they can



Still from *Elke Allowing the Floor to Rise Up over Her, Face Up*, 1973
Lee Strasberg instructing actors in Paris, 1967

make themselves believe things that other people can't? What exactly is an actor, and why call someone an actor, and what do you do with them once you call them an actor? *What are they?*

Although the Meisner technique existed in the 1970s, when these videos were shot, it wasn't really the cultural force that it would become in the 1980s. In the 1970s Lee Strasberg's brand of method acting was still the dominant school. One of its cornerstones was a technique called "affective memory," where you recall sensory memories with the aim of *reexperiencing* those moments. In 1975, a few years after Tony and Elke lay down for Nauman, we see Strasberg leading a student named through an affective memory exercise, which is returning her to childhood [*Levine plays a video clip*]:

FRANCESCA URSONE: I'm little. I have a flat, white shoe. A dress. I don't like being small. . . . [*crying*] Cold. I'm cold. I'm cold. Black tree, white sidewalks, ugly telephone poles. Gray.¹⁴

She's really there. It seems like self-indulgent, regressionesque, EST-Gestalt-therapy-trance-cult-whatever nonsense, but it also seems pretty effective. Sure enough, after twenty minutes Tony, Nauman's actor, has a weird choking fit as his molecules start to mingle with the cement floor. According to Nauman:

I got pretty scared, and didn't know what to do. I didn't know if I should "wake him up" or what, if he was kind of sleepwalking. I didn't know if he was physically ill, or if he was really gasping and choking. He finally sat up and kind of controlled himself, and we talked about it. . . . He was really scared. He said, "I just tried to do it too fast, and I was afraid I couldn't get out." What had happened was that as his chest began to sink through the floor, it was filled up and he just couldn't breathe anymore, so he started to . . . to choke. . . . He said, "I was afraid to move my hand, because I thought if I moved it some of the molecules would stay there and I would lose it—it would come all apart and I couldn't get it out." Interestingly, the night before, the same thing had happened to the girl in the other tape.¹⁵

It's true. If you can sit through an hour of it, you will actually see Elke coughing and choking as well.¹⁶ Once again we're presented with specific psychological techniques that are employed in opposite directions. The actors' capacity to empty out their minds and believe anything leads either to the liberation of the self on Strasberg's stage, or the complete elimination of the self in Nauman's studio. [*Levine plays clips from two videos side-by-side—one documents actors letting out "abh" sounds in Strasberg's class; the other is a clip of Nauman's Raw Material with Continuous Shift MMMM (1991). Both emit a moaning sound.*]

But when you think about it in terms of power relations, the evacuation of self is a problem either way. Strasberg was a guru to these actors, leading them to liberation. But as you can see from this footage of his master class, he's incredibly abusive. Even if the goal is freeing the natural self, from the outside Strasberg's exercises look and sound just as cruel and arbitrary as Nauman's instructions to a mime in *Shit in Your Hat—Head on a Chair* (1990):

MAN: Put your hand on your hat, your hat in your lap. Drop your hat.

Put your hand in your lap, put your head in your hand, your hand in your lap.

Put your hand in your lap. Put your hat on your hand in your lap.

Put your head on your lap, on your hand in your lap.

Eventually he tells her to shit in her hat and put it on her head. She mimes it.

3. SPECTATORS

This from-the-inside/from-the-outside problem is Nauman's essential problem: inside consciousness/outside consciousness; inside a cage/outside a cage; inside your head/outside your head. So, in order to

begin thinking about spectators, I want you to imagine that Tony was actually successful in sinking into the floor and that Elke was actually successful in having the floor rise up over her. They both vanished. So where does that leave us spectators? It leaves us standing there with nothing to look at. On display.

I credit Nauman for my initial thinking about spectatorship as well. A few months after I saw those pieces at the Deutsche Guggenheim, I wound up at Dia:Beacon in Beacon, New York, where I came across his *Indoor Outdoor Seating Arrangement* (1999, p. 85), which is basically a big set of bleachers. According to the artist's plans, they can be arranged in several different configurations, all of which stretch from indoors to outdoors. The way they were arranged at the time was consistent with Nauman's *Stadium Piece* (1997–99, p. 85) at Western Washington University in Bellingham, where the stadium seats basically face each other. The bleachers are reduced to sculptural objects because there's nothing to see. There is nothing to spectate. Arranged like this, they make you think about them as architectural cues, and the ways in which certain kinds of institutional structures, or institutional spaces, cue a very narrow range of behaviors. Bleachers are designed to make you stand up and cheer. Or to sit down. Or to stand up. Or to sit down. Stand up, sit down, stand up, sit down, stand up. . . .

In 2012 I made a work about spectatorial behavior called *Habit* (p. 89). I wanted to see how theater would manifest under gallery viewing conditions. I commissioned a totally average “couch drama”—they're always set in a ranch house, the house is always trashed, it's always two guys and a girl in their twenties—and then I built the house in a larger exhibition space, New York's (then-vacant) Essex Street Market, and staffed it with three actors for eight hours a day. They could not deviate from the dialogue of the play, but they weren't tied down to any staging. So they could do whatever they wanted within this fully functional house: eat, piss, shit, shower, nap, watch TV, so long as the



Indoor Outdoor Seating Arrangement, 1999. Dia:Beacon, Beacon, New York, 2003–09; 2016–
Stadium Piece, 1997–99

play was performed over and over. It was this constantly changing thing. They had to enact the play over and over, but they could live as they pleased. And the admission policy was totally free, as at an art gallery. My question was, If you turn theater into a sculptural object, if you don't charge admission, if you get rid of seats, if you get rid of the illusion of the unique event as well as everything that signifies the experience of the theater, what's left? How would an audience watch? How long would spectators behave? And could you still follow a narrative or experience the performance as a narrative?

The work was intended to be a more generous version of *'Night, Motherfucker*, and I hoped it would get me away from my reputation for torturing actors and putting them in bleak, Nauman-y situations. The house was furnished with cable, and we stocked the fridge every day. They had an infinite range of options in terms of how to execute the play; they had a strictly adhered-to, eight-hour workday, and were on Actors' Equity Association contracts. No privations, no limits, everything was aboveboard. It was meant to highlight the actors' creativity, the virtuosity of their form of labor, and nothing was done to make the undertaking feel futile.

Yet they were also being observed constantly, as in a fishbowl. I'd like to say it was nothing like Nauman's *Double Steel Cage Piece* (1974, p. 87), where as soon as you go into the cage, you are simultaneously exploring the inside of the cage and trapped on display. I'd like to say the infinite variety of improvised deaths (these plays always end in suicide or murder) was nothing like *Violent Incident* (1986, pp. 89, 165), where Nauman hired actors to enact twelve permutations of the same scene, which involved beating and stabbing. I'd like to say the situation wasn't that bleak or dire. I'd like to say that just because you watched the same script performed in an infinite number of ways, it didn't become claustrophobic or a comment on limits, the way that Nauman's work does. I'd like to say all of that, but . . .



And for that matter, in rehearsal with actors, Nauman seems like such a sweet guy! Nothing like Strasberg. He is totally helpful in a rehearsal for *Violent Incident* [Levine plays a video clip]:

WOMAN: Very funny. [laughter]

NAUMAN: You have to stand up. Try and stand up [laughter]. . . .
And you've got to kick it.

WOMAN: Oh, right. The important part—

NAUMAN: When you get goosed, I think you move the chair onto the floor. To get it out of the way.

WOMAN: Oh, yeah, here's the— [Nauman and the actors talk inaudibly]

NAUMAN: So we've got to work the action out so you get beat and you bend over, so you can also reach the table, so you're close to the knife.

MAN: Oh, okay.

NAUMAN: You have to stab her. And then you . . . have to struggle with it so that he gets stuck and she'll have to [makes getting-stabbed sound] or something. And then struggle with the knife and she gets the knife from you and maybe you get surprised [makes a surprised gesture]: "Oh shit!" And then you get stuck, and then you can both fall down then.

MAN: And we might have to turn the action around . . . get the knife.

NAUMAN: Okay. So kick me again.

So you can be a nice guy who seems to torture actors or a complete asshole who seems to liberate them, but at the end of the day, unfortunately, there are still a bunch of performers and a bunch of spectators. In *Double Steel Cage Piece* or the Performance Corridors, the spectators are suddenly on display, but they don't exactly consider themselves performers. How do you describe that role reversal?

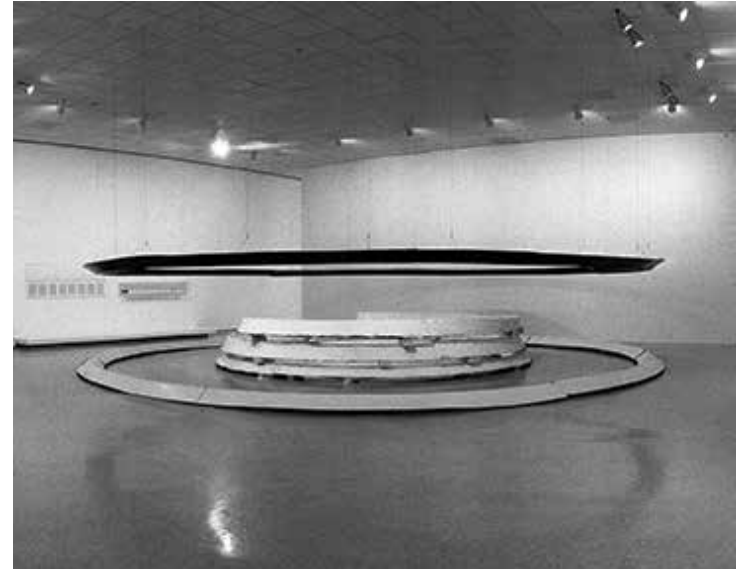


4. HUMANS

Let's return to this idea that Tony and Elke were actually swallowed by the floor and left the upper world behind. Where are they now? Where would they have found themselves? I propose they would have found themselves in an underground, unviewable, out-of-existence space, such as Nauman's *Model for Trench and Four Buried Passages* (1977, p. 91) or *Smoke Rings: 2 Concentric Tunnels Skewed, Noncommunicating* (1980). After Nauman was done with corridors, he turned his attention to tunnels and trenches. He refers to all of them somewhat sinisterly as models for tunnels. The thing about these models for tunnels, or "sculptures," that strikes one most immediately is that they are basically models for prisons. It's carceral space, obviously, because there is no egress. It's carceral space, obviously, because the interiors are out of view, inaccessible. They're also, obviously, spaces for punishment—they're all hallway, and no rooms. If you were to find yourself in one of these places, you'd have no choice but to keep walking; and it's not like you could rest comfortably, because the walls are so steeply angled as to form triangles. As Nauman once said: "I find triangles really uncomfortable, disconcerting kinds of spaces. There is no comfortable place to stay inside them or outside them. It's not like a circle or square that give [*sic*] you security."¹⁷ Lastly, these spaces, in addition to not letting you sit or relax, imply perpetual movement by their very name, "tunnel," as well as by their very shape, a continuous loop.

So that's what Tony and Elke got for their good-faith efforts to enact belief. They're stuck in an underground tunnel and have no choice but to keep moving. They have to keep executing the demands of the space, prompted to keep moving. And what else would we call fulfilling such prompts, if not performing?

This whole read isn't as fanciful as you might think. Squeezing through Nauman's *Performance Corridor*—and there's that transitional space again, "corridors," "tunnels"—you're experiencing movement in



Model for Trench and Four Buried Passages, 1977

a corridor that was actually designed to force someone—Nauman—to exaggerate their gestures. You experience this forced performance in the *Green Light Corridor* (1970, p. 191). You're experiencing this forced performance in the video corridors, in the unsettling triangular room, in the terrifying *Double Steel Cage Piece*, in the piece called *Room with My Soul Left Out, Room That Does Not Care* (1984, p. 33), which is actually a room composed entirely of corridors. And the one time Nauman designs a space that isn't transitional, an actual, straight-up, four-cornered room, it keeps screaming at you to *Get Out of My Mind, Get Out of This Room* (1968).

Regarding those video corridors, the corridors have monitors placed within them and the monitors are connected to surveillance cameras. But the monitors are not matched with the surveillance cameras the way you think they'd be. Instead, as you approach the monitor, which you expect to mirror your movements, you witness your body walking away, watching from behind. (This is the classic permutation; there are others.) You are actually watching yourself leave. This monitor sits on top of another monitor showing exactly the same hallway with nobody in it; although you should be in the picture, you're not. It is really, really bizarre to see your body in parts that way, your head cut out of the frame.

The feedback loop is not the most disorienting element of the work. Rather, what is most disorienting is the fact that you are performing for no one but yourself. Those monitors properly belong in the surveillance rooms of whatever lab technicians or security guards are observing you. But no one is watching. Nobody cares. Somebody cared enough to install the cameras, but now no one cares. You're just performing for no one, in an infinite loop. You are both performer and spectator.



5. CODA: MINDS

A couple of years ago, I got very interested in this idea of the simultaneous performer and spectator, and in the idea of infiltrators and plants. So I designed a project, *Character Analysis* (2013–17, p. 95), where I had actors spend three months with volunteers, acquiring their subjectivity. They would meet three times a week, and the idea was for the actor to basically rasterize the volunteer, break him down according to the actor's understanding of what drives a character, and then rebuild the volunteer in the actor's own body, using the actor's techniques. The actors and volunteers were paired on the basis of schedule, to ensure that there wouldn't be any rough caricature or mimicry going on; that it would really be about acquiring an inner subjectivity. This is where things get fun because there's a mismatch between inner self and outer self, and that's when you can start to *pass*. So Lelaina can secretly experience the world as Bruce, a man twenty years her senior, and no one will be the wiser; and Kristen, a twenty-four-year-old black woman, can secretly experience the world as me, and so on and so on and so on. I wanted to see just how far these limits on subjectivity could go and, specifically, how far actors could take them.

Of course, to actually become somebody else, you need to evacuate yourself, even if you don't leave your body behind, even if it doesn't sink into the floor. Once again, in preparing this talk, I am slightly depressed to discover that my celebration of actorly virtuosity has been pretty much preempted by Nauman's own treatment of empty heads. Some of his casts—of which there many—are of his friends. Some of them are of performers, some of poets. I think one is the head of opera singer Rinde Eckert. Nauman is, as we've noted, very selective about when he works with professional performers. He also does not clean out the resulting molds. The plugs that you insert into your nose when your face is cast, the little breathing tube that you place between your lips, these leave behind traces when they're cast



notes

- 1 These include videos of James Franco putting on makeup in a studio and a woman voguing her way, in very intense HD, up and down a mirrored corridor. I don't think she did the full hour. I think she just looped it. See Alison Chernick, "James Franco as Bruce Nauman, 2010," YouTube, October 25, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i5BoXOhEkRE>; and Iain and Jane, "Walk with Nauman (Re-Performance Corridor)," Vimeo, April 5, 2009, <https://vimeo.com/4016074>.
- 2 In conversation with Lorraine Sciarra in 1972, the artist said: "It was hard to do. Because I don't like the idea of free manipulation. Like you put a bunch of stuff out there and let people do what they want with it. I really had some more specific kinds of experiences in mind and, without having to write out a list of what they should do, I wanted to make [a] kind of play experiences unavailable, just by the preciseness of the area." See Lorraine Sciarra, "Bruce Nauman" (January 1972), in *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words; Writings and Interviews*, ed. Janet Kraynak (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), p. 167.
- 3 Bruce Nauman reflected in a 1980 interview with Michele de Angelus: "I think it was very hard for me to present it without any particular instructions, because I felt I didn't want people to make their own performance. I wanted to control the situation, and I felt that by giving something as simple and uninflected as that corridor, that I was allowing people a lot more latitude than I was used to. . . . I was very uncomfortable. At the same time, the idea of the dead-end corridor, which I hadn't thought of when I built the piece but I found out about it when it was there—it really appealed to me." See Michele de Angelus, "Interview with Bruce Nauman" (May 27 and 30, 1980), in Kraynak, *Please Pay Attention Please*, pp. 258–59.
- 4 *Dallas*, season 2, episode 22, "The Outsiders," directed by Dennis Donnelly, written by David Jacobs, Leonard Katzman, and Camille Marchetta, aired March 16, 1979.
- 5 Chris Dercon, "Keep Taking It Apart: A Conversation with Bruce Nauman" (1986), in Kraynak, *Please Pay Attention Please*, p. 314.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 William Gillette, *The Illusion of the First Time in Acting* (New York: Dramatic Museum of Columbia University, 1915).
- 8 Tucker Smallwood, "Eclecticism," Tucker Smallwood–Blog, August 30, 2013, <http://www.tuckersmallwoodblog.com/?m=201308>.
- 9 Tucker Smallwood, e-mail message to author, April 18, 2015.
- 10 *Stanford Meisner Master Class* (Los Angeles: Sanford Meisner Estate, 2006), Vimeo, July 29, 2014, 3 hr., 52 min., <http://vimeo.com/ondemand/meisnerdvd>.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Bruce Nauman, quoted in Ian Wallace and Russell Keziere, "Bruce Nauman Interviewed" (October 1978), in Kraynak, *Please Pay Attention Please*, p. 191.
- 13 Jan Butterfield, "Bruce Nauman: The Center of Yourself" (1975), in Kraynak, *Please Pay Attention Please*, p. 176.
- 14 *An Evening at the Actor's Studio with Lee Strasberg—Extended Version* (Electro Media Productions, 2007), DVD, <https://iconicartsintl.org/products/an-evening-at-the-actors-studio-with-lee-strasberg-extended-version>.
- 15 Nauman, quoted in Butterfield, "The Center of Yourself," p. 177.
- 16 In preparing this lecture for publication, a third option occurs to me, which is just that lying on unpainted concrete increases the likelihood of inhaling concrete dust. So you might think you were choking on fiction, when you were actually choking on a fact.
- 17 Bruce Nauman, quoted in Joan Simon, "Breaking the Silence: An Interview with Bruce Nauman" (January 1987), in Kraynak, *Please Pay Attention Please*, p. 332.

David Levine's lecture on Bruce Nauman took place at Dia:Chelsea, New York, on April 21, 2015.